

## **Reflections on the portuguese american political predicament**

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In stark contrast to what holds true for politics in the United States, Portuguese politics is devoid of ethnic contestation for power. The political role of Portuguese of African descent is at most marginal, that of Gypsies almost nil. In Portugal, over ninety percent of the population considers itself solely Portuguese; in America, those who claim no ancestry other than American are among the smallest of minorities.

Can anyone here name a member of the Portuguese National Assembly who is not ethnically Portuguese? Has any ever existed? I cannot conceive of effectively lobbying an American elected official without knowing his ethnic background, and in no area of politics is ethnicity as significant as when it involves an issue that impinges upon an exercise of sovereignty. Can one conceive of American policy towards Northern Ireland independent of the political power of Irish Americans? Can one conceive of American policy towards Israel independent of the political influence of Jewish Americans?

Can anyone here point out to me a single instance where a Portuguese politician took a position in respect to Portuguese foreign policy that one could attribute to his or her being of an ethnicity other than wholly Portuguese? When it comes to the intricacies of ethnic politics, Portuguese suffer from political naiveté in the extreme.

Portuguese-American ignorance of the intricacies and dynamics of ethnic politics can be most clearly contrasted with Jewish-American knowledge of such intricacies and dynamics: the former can be attributed to Portugal's experience as Europe's oldest nation state, and the latter to the Jewish Community's experience as the world's oldest stateless nation. Unaware of the dynamics and intricacies of ethnic politics, the Portuguese in America all too often scream out when discretion is called for, and keep their mouths shut when voices should be raised.

In Fall River, Massachusetts, the most Portuguese of American cities, the four major ethnic groups contending for political power, beside the Portuguese, are the Irish, French Canadians, Polish, and Christian Lebanese. These ethnic groups find it impossible to conceive of ethnic politics as being anything other than politics as such.

Portuguese immigrants to America emigrated from a Portugal where the fact that one happened to be Portuguese was devoid of political significance: class could be divisive, but uncontested was the fact that Portugal was Portuguese. While for the Portuguese immigrant to America, experience of the dynamics of ethnic politics was nonexistent; for the Irish Catholic immigrating from an Ireland ruled by British Protestants, French Catholic immigrating from a Canada ruled by Anglo-Protestants, Polish Catholic immigrating from a Poland ruled by Orthodox Russians and Prussian Protestants, and Christian Lebanese immigrating from a Lebanon ruled by Muslim Ottomans, what was uncontested, was the paramount political significance of one's ethnicity.

To the Irish, French Canadian, Polish, or Lebanese, being Catholic is inseparable from one's political identity: it is what differentiates oneself from one's political opponents. Catholicism has a different significance for the Portuguese: one may be for or against the Catholic Church, there certainly is an anti-clerical tradition in Portugal, but this anti-clerical tradition is more sure of what it opposes than what it is for: the debate is about the value of the Catholic inheritance of Portugal, not the fact that Portugal's inheritance is Catholic. The Portuguese seem unaware that when they discuss religion, pro or contra, they almost always do so in specifically Catholic terms; Catholic hegemony in Portugal is never more assuredly confirmed than when it is being attacked by someone who is unable to distinguish Catholicism from religion as such. While as for the Irish, French Canadian, Polish, and Christian Lebanese, the Catholic Church is seen as the only effective alternative to counter a state whose mechanisms are in the hands of others, to the Portuguese, the Catholic Church is inextricable from the very conception of the state.

We know what something is by knowing what it is not. Because of their ethnic homogeneity, the Portuguese share a way of being that is much more coherent than that of most other nationalities; as a result, the Portuguese have a unique insight into the mentalities of other Portuguese, and yet, at the same time, a blindness to themselves.

In America, it's common to hear a Portuguese person, with a knowing raise of the eyebrows, claim that he cannot be fooled by another Portuguese person because he knows how "they" are. The person making such a claim is usually oblivious to the fact that he is projecting his own intentions onto others. When a Portuguese person in America is about to take advantage of

someone else who happens to be Portuguese, he rationalizes his doing so by making reference to the inherently self-serving and devious nature of the Portuguese. By way of this ingenious maneuver, the prospective victim is deprived of his innocence, and the perpetrator of his individual responsibility. Using projection as a means of rationalization, by acting upon the attitudes they have of each other, the Portuguese are caught in a self-fulfilling prophecy of divisions and backbiting that only confirms the attitudes they have of each other. It is almost impossible in America to find persons of an ethnic group other than the Portuguese publicly attacking others of the same ethnicity specifically on the grounds of their own ethnicity.

One of the reasons why the Portuguese are so politically divided in America is because they came from a country where class not ethnicity divided people: there was no need to consciously assume an ethnic identity that was never called into question in the first place: there was no need to develop an appreciation of the need for the conscious cultivation of the ingredients of ethnic unity in a multiethnic political environment.

In order to understand the position of the Portuguese in the American ethnic hierarchy, one needs to return to the 1920s legislation that for all intents and purposes barred Portuguese immigration to the United States. Not unlike other undesirable southern or eastern European nationalities of the time, the Portuguese were barred on the basis of their racial inferiority even as northwestern Europeans were given free rein to immigrate as they saw fit. Even for those Portuguese born in the United States, it was apparent, some Americans were more American than others. After the fad of attributing nationality differences to supposed innate biological differences had gone out of favor with the revelation of the full extent of Nazi genocidal policies, the Americans passed new immigration legislation that did little more than replace the openly racist language of the 1920s legislation with the more, at the time, politically correct language of culture as a rationalization for a legally enforced ethnic hierarchy.

The twentieth century history of American xenophobia is inextricable from the twentieth century history of the ascendancy of the Republican Party. The first period of Republican ascendancy took place in the 1920s, when the openly racist national quota system was instituted, and the Red Scare led to the deportation of thousands of immigrants. The second period of Republican ascendancy was during the 1950s, when the openly racist national quota system was replaced by a less racially blatant but even more restrictive national quota system, and

McCarthyism led to the deportation of thousands of immigrants. The third period of Republican ascendancy began with Newt Gingrich and the Contract on America, when immigrant rights to social protections were undermined, and passage of the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act led to the deportation of thousands of immigrants.

Portuguese immigrants of both the pre-1920s and post-1965 great immigrant waves held a position of singularity in the larger immigrant waves of which they were part that points to the place the Portuguese were to be assigned in an evolving American ethnic hierarchy. The immigrant wave that ended in the 1920s consisted predominantly of Slavic and Latin or Mediterranean Catholics as well as Eastern European Jews. The Portuguese were considered members of a Latin or Mediterranean biological race possessing indelible inherent qualities that differentiated them from the Nordic, Germanic, or Anglo-Saxon race that possessed the genetic substance of which real Americans were made. With the political ascendancy of the Irish, the concept of a distinct and inferior Celtic race, which in the nineteenth century was so much in vogue, was no longer applicable. The specific place of the Portuguese in the early twentieth century racial hierarchy cannot be attributed solely to the Portuguese being members of the Latin or Mediterranean race, for the presence of Moorish blood and the immigration of black Portuguese from Cape Verde placed even the European Portuguese on the borderlines of whiteness. Although they were considered white, it was never whiteness without taint.

In the context of the mass immigration to America that commenced in the mid 1960s and continues to this day, the Portuguese immigrant is once again uniquely situated. Unlike the earlier discussed wave of immigration, this wave is overwhelmingly composed of Asians and Latin Americans. Whereas the Portuguese were once among the darker hues of an immigrant wave, they are now among the very lightest. The new Portuguese immigration started immediately after the implementation of the 1965 legislation and exhausted itself within a decade, while the immigration of Latin Americans and Asians began as a trickle and reached a crescendo only a decade after the Portuguese immigration had come to an end. Portuguese deportees have become national anti-deportation poster-boys because of the tender ages at which they immigrated and their whiteness. It is this whiteness, and the American upbringing of so many, that allows Portuguese deportees to tug on the heartstrings of a dominant America that finds it more difficult to identify with immigrants who are more recent and of another color.

The status of Portuguese Americans in the most Portuguese American of regions, Southeastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island, has experienced evolutionary and, at key moments, revolutionary change. Immigrant incorporation involves drastic changes in ways of being that are incremental and inexorable and builds up tensions with dominant groups until an event sparks an explosion of built-up emotions, resentments, and aspirations. A flurry of action and fervid discussion takes place as all involved recognize that what had seemed a natural and, therefore, inevitable ethnic hierarchy, was in large part arbitrary, and, if not arbitrary, nonetheless, no longer relevant.

When a gang rape occurred in a New Bedford bar called Big Dan's, a host of powerful forces converged on the nationally televised Fall River court trial of the suspects. Widely disseminated but false reports about the number of rapists and the size of an audience that supposedly cheered them on riveted the attention of a national television audience. The uncanny un-American appearance of the defendants, an un-American appearance that was accentuated by the bulging earphones the defendants wore in order to follow the translation of the court proceedings, allowed a national audience to experience the pleasure of a sordid voyeur without the inhibitions and guilt such voyeurism would normally afford; since, after all, the rapists were obviously so different from the majority of Americans, and so unknown, that one could easily attribute to them what you will without the danger of such wanted but, to the self, deeply denied fantasies coming in conflict with either one's non-existent knowledge of the Portuguese, or the pangs of conscience that an identification with the perpetrators would otherwise afford. People found pleasure alternating between self-righteousness and rape jokes. But, although the vast majority of Americans, with their non-existent knowledge of the Portuguese, could project their fantasies onto the Portuguese as if they were a blank screen, those few Americans who were having increasingly more intimate contact with the Portuguese, instead of ignorance as an excuse, had interests to defend.

For the first decade and a half since the re-initiation of Portuguese immigration in the 1960's, the new immigrants were so different and so segregated by language, customs, and occupation that the larger community chose to see them as inherently inferior. Surely it was impossible to ignore such large numbers of immigrants, but it was also just as impossible to imagine such immigrants being other than the ultimate objects of others' intentions. One could

argue the relative merits, the advantages and disadvantages, of their presence, but, to those who saw themselves as determining the region's destiny, the comforting fact of the inherent inferiority of what they referred to as greenhorns was beyond dispute. By the early 1980s, such a belief in the inherent superiority of the native born was no longer tenable.

By the early 1980s, immigrants had learned enough English that the debate as to their status and role in the affairs of the larger community could no longer take place without their increasing intervention. Immigrants were no longer in desperate economic straits as to how they were to make ends meet, establish economic independence from those who had sponsored their immigration, and acquire the American minimum basic of consumer durables. In fact, a substantial number of immigrants, by dint of what appeared to the native born as an insatiable work ethic, combined with a prodigious savings rate, had invested in the acquisition of the houses in which they lived; the supposedly inferior greenhorn was now quite often the native born American's landlord. Immigrants, who in the initial years after immigration were an electoral non-factor, became a key part of a coalition that was to elect the second of Fall River's Portuguese-American mayors. American born Portuguese who had often found it politically expedient to take pains to differentiate themselves from the immigrants, now found it increasingly politically expedient to do otherwise.

A factor not unrelated to the transmutation of the position of the immigrant vis-à-vis the larger community was the explosion in real estate values that took place at this time. It was now not uncommon for illiterate, non-English speakers who had been in what Americans considered abject poverty not much more than a decade prior to now be greater holders of wealth than a substantial portion of the native born. The cast system that had been set in place with the re-initiation of Portuguese immigration to the United States, because of the build up of tensions that were an inevitable outcome of the contradictions that derived from the immigrants inexorable assimilation, exploded.

That an accusation of rape ignited the explosion should not be surprising: throughout history, accusations of rape have been an opportunity to demarcate the boundaries between differing communities. This particular accusation of rape became inseparable from the contestation over the identity of the Portuguese because the wall that separated the immigrant community from the larger community had been breached, and for many in the larger community

this entailed a threat to one's status that could not go uncontested. A transitional conjuncture had been reached; there was no turning back; in the glare of the national spotlight, local emotions ran high because the outcome was not wholly predetermined.

A variety of tactics that had been more or less effective in dividing descendants of the pre-1920s wave of Portuguese immigrants from the post-1965 immigrants were becoming increasingly less effective; even though Portuguese Americans attempted to distance themselves from association with rape, there was a budding awareness that the larger community's willful intention of associating propensity to gang rape with one's being Portuguese as such would not leave even American born Portuguese unscathed. If immigrants who were now often fluent in English were still to be accused of a greater propensity of committing rape, how was such a charge not to be applicable to one's being Portuguese in the most general sense of the word. Techniques of divide and conquer that had been used to such stunning effect since the latest immigrant wave were now used all the more blatantly in a futile attempt to counteract their increasing ineffectiveness in practice. Those who saw it in their interest that the Portuguese community be anything but united would waste no opportunity in their attempts to compliment Portuguese Americans for their not being greenhorns, even as they wasted no opportunity to remind Portuguese immigrants, the hackneyed cliché, that prejudice against Portuguese immigrants is the *sin qua non* of the Portuguese American.

The implications of "Big Dan's" for an exercise in the deciphering of identity are too many for a paper such as this to explore, but a particular instance that at least hints at the usefulness of such an exploration of the opportunistic and partisan nature of such identity politics took place at a talk about the events surrounding the Big Dan's trial several years after the trial. Participants at the talk found it almost impossible to hold the perpetrators of the crime wholly responsible for the crime for which they had been convicted: there was a need to somehow associate responsibility for the rape to some larger community of which the rapists were only a part; the only dispute was over the boundaries of the community with which the rapists were to be associated. What was revealing about the divergences of opinion was that the divergences had less to do with the actual rapists and much more to do with the identity of the person purporting to objectively delineate the boundaries of the community of which the rapists were a supposed part. For the continental Portuguese, the fact that the rapists were Azorean was crucial to

understanding what had occurred; for the Azorean residing Azoreans, what was significant was that these rapists were immigrants in America, as if some qualitative change in sexual mores occurred when the plane touched down in Boston; for the Azoreans residing in the United States, the supposed looseness of American morals was often cited as a contributing cause to the rapists' downfall; for the American born Portuguese Americans, one could not deny that the fact of being an immigrant Portuguese made one, if not guilty, at least more predisposed to the commission of such crimes, and to the non-Portuguese Americans, it was clear as day; it all had something to do with that inscrutable thing we call being Portuguese. It seemed to escape all: particular individuals are the only ones responsible for the crimes that they commit.

In the mid 1990s, over a decade since the infamous Big Dan's trial, another instance of a transitional conjuncture occurred which, while only directly affecting the city of Fall River, nonetheless, provides insight into the dynamics of a more unified Portuguese-American identity. Most immigrants had been in the country between twenty and thirty years; a whole generation of children of post-1965 immigrants had been born and raised in the United States, and many of the linguistic and cultural barriers which had once made relations between Portuguese Americans and Portuguese immigrants problematic, in transmuted form, reappeared as a generation gap. Many children of immigrants and immigrants themselves turned their back on what the Portuguese Americans had once called the old country, even as a sizable number of descendants of the original first wave of immigrants, now fully confident in their American identity, found new found curiosity and pride in fabled ancestors.

When, in the mid 1990s, Fall River, the city with the largest population of Portuguese in the country, and the only locality where the Portuguese compose an absolute majority, for the first time in its history, elected a Portuguese majority to the city council, and this council in-turn elected someone of Portuguese ethnicity to be President of the council, all hell broke loose. Local radio stations and local newspapers sent out a steady barrage of propaganda accusing the Portuguese of wanting to take over and voting for candidates on the basis of ethnicity as opposed to competence. What was remarkable about this fusillade was that all the Portuguese members of the city council, and the Portuguese community as a whole, were repeatedly referred to as simply the Portuguese: the larger community's exploitation of the distinction between descendants of pre-1920s immigrants, and post-1965 immigrants -- a distinction that had come about because of



the more than forty years that a racist national quota system prevented all but negligible numbers of Portuguese from immigrating to the United States -- had finally been overcome.

When the next election for city council came around, many Portuguese were cowed into believing that a vote for an elected official who happens to be of one's own ethnic background was un-American, and that competence lies with being other than Portuguese; all those of Portuguese ethnicity on the city council lost their election. When some in the Portuguese community realized that almost all non-Portuguese voters had voted against all the Portuguese candidates, even though these candidates ran on the most diverse records conceivable, their outrage was met by a chorus of local media propaganda that was indistinguishable from the propaganda spewed out at the social gatherings of the victors: "How dare they accuse us of voting against someone just because of their ethnicity; after all, we vote only on the basis of competence, not ethnicity; after all, we are all Americans." The clearly understood idea being that to be Portuguese implied being something other than American. People who in elections past talked about the Polish, the Irish, and the French, and who made a clear and opportunistic distinction between Portuguese Americans and what they referred to as greenhorns, now no longer did so. The Portuguese had inexorably become one, and the others quite consciously now referred to themselves as simply Americans in order to construct a majority of voters capable of once again excluding the Portuguese, who were a majority of the populace but still not a majority of the electorate.

It may be appropriate at this time to warn the reader as to the appearance of an opportunistic Portuguese ethnic entrepreneur that not only surfs upon the wave of increasing Portuguese-American power, but also does so in a manner that is particularly detrimental to the larger interests of the Portuguese-American community. Portuguese immigrants are far from the time when material needs were their main preoccupation; now their desperate desire is for the prestige and recognition that their low occupational standing and foreign accents often deny them. This opportunistic ethnic entrepreneur exploits this desperate need for recognition and prestige by running frequent propagandistic marketing campaigns that cynically equate the prestige of the Portuguese community with the size of the budget under his discretion, and what is particularly disturbing is that he exploits this desperate need for recognition and prestige in a

manner that, instead of calling into question, reinforces the illegitimate ethnic hierarchy that keeps the Portuguese relegated to the lower rungs.

While this ethnic entrepreneur never misses an opportunity to publicly portray any increase in the amount of money under his control as if it were the realization of the Portuguese community's long sought after dream of recognition and prestige, and to extol the burgeoning power of the Portuguese-American legislative delegation and the now numerous Portuguese vote that makes such a legislative delegation possible, he is in the peculiar duplicitous habit of angrily stating that ethnicity has nothing to do with the staffing of the positions that his budgets afford, when in truth, it has everything to do with it, for, irrespective of his rhetoric, being Portuguese is a disqualification for the permanent professional positions his bloated budgets make possible.

The institution of which this ethnic entrepreneur is part is almost totally devoid of persons of Portuguese ethnicity in positions of power: the Portuguese are only represented at levels proportionate to their proportion of the communities of which this public institution is supposedly a representative part, when it comes to the ethnic composition of the janitorial services.

Decades ago there was a rationale for the disproportionate occupational subservience of the Portuguese community because of the vast formal educational discrepancy between the Portuguese and the larger American community; such a rationale no longer holds: the continuing absence of those of Portuguese ethnicity from positions of influence is increasingly no longer the result of what one knows but of who one knows. Highly qualified children of hard working but illiterate parents are now denied opportunities for occupational advancement, not because of any non-existent incompetence, but because of the dearth of occupationally relevant personal connections such parents can afford.

Those who dominate the institutions that allow the Portuguese only token representation, seek out opportunistic ethnic entrepreneurs in order to provide a public relations facade for their continued monopolization of power. These opportunistic ethnic entrepreneurs also allow a means by which people who have never had the least bit interest in the Portuguese community, and in many cases, even were at the head of movements to keep the Portuguese in their place, can tap into the recent increase in public funding ostensibly for things Portuguese.

Not unlike a person making use of a lever, who maximizes his power by maximizing the length of the bar on one side of the fulcrum, and minimizing the length of the bar on the other

side of the fulcrum, this opportunistic ethnic entrepreneur maximizes his power by maximizing the number of Portuguese people, he claims to represent, on the outside of his personal empire, and minimizing the number of Portuguese people, who could call into question his monopolization of all things Portuguese, on the inside of his personal empire. This opportunistic ethnic entrepreneur maximizes his power in the name but at the cost of the larger Portuguese community. When De Gaulle said Europe, he meant France, and when De Gaulle said France, he meant De Gaulle.

This opportunistic ethnic entrepreneur walks a tight rope of opportunism, and alternates between public proclamations of the Portuguese Speaking World's Greatness, in order to better access Lisbon's largesse, and disparaging remarks about the low class pronunciation of the immigrant from *São Miguel*, in order to placate those who, although now convinced of the money that can be gained by playing the ethnic entrepreneur's game, nonetheless, continue to demand that the real Portuguese community, whom they are supposedly suppose to serve, retain the fabled humility that for centuries has kept it in its place. This opportunistic ethnic entrepreneur has no taste for *choriço e Santo Cristo*.

Since the American system of single member, winner-take-all electoral districts favor those who are geographically concentrated, the fact that the Portuguese in America may be few, but are not far between, that they are the second most geographically concentrated ethnic group in the country, is not without political consequence.

If we seek to institute an electoral structure most conducive to the political participation of our community, we should not ignore the lessons of earlier defeats. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, at the same time that southern whites disenfranchised the African-American population of the south, northern non-immigrant whites instituted a host of structural electoral changes that undermined the franchise for immigrants. What had been a common practice, the exercise of the franchise by non-citizens, disappeared, even as the institutionalization of non-partisan, off-year, at-large local elections, as they were designed to do, disproportionately disenfranchised immigrant communities.

The structural and cultural differences between American and Portuguese politics must be kept in mind if one is to appreciate the elements of effective lobbying in the United States. One of the key differences between the federal, separation of powers, checks and balances system of the

United States, and the centralized, unified government of Portugal -- a centralization and unity that is not unrelated to the accentuated homogeneity of Portugal as Europe's first nation state, and of which the autonomous regional governments of the Azores and Madeira are an anomaly -- is the United States' single member, winner-take-all electoral districts, and the two party primary system to which it has given rise, versus Portugal's disciplined, centralized, multi-party structure.

Persons seeking to be elected to the United States House of Representatives become their party's nominees by way of victory in a primary election in which any voter in the congressional district who so chooses may vote. There is no national party hierarchy that can override a particular constituency's choice of party standard-bearer. While persons seeking to run for statewide office, such as United States Senator, may need some minimal threshold of party convention support, not unlike the case with U.S. Representatives, the decisive contest to be the party's standard bearer takes place in an open primary. While in Portugal, defection from party unity on an important vote in the National Assembly can be tantamount to crisis, in the United States, a straight party line vote is almost always impossible because of the direct accountability of the elected official to a particular constituency.

While in Portugal, it is a fairly simple matter to find out the particular position of any particular party on any particular piece of proposed legislation, and to assume with some degree of confidence that elected officials will vote in accordance with the party position arrived at, in the United States, elected representatives are in a never ending state of amorphous compromise and conflict: each representative possesses a unique constituency, and is therefore ever ready to change his or her vote from nay to yea, or yea to nay, when the proposed piece of legislation meets criteria that very well may be as unique to that particular member of Congress as is the uniqueness of the interests of the people from the district he or she happens to represent. Rare is the system where knowledge of the game being played is more needed, but rare also, is the system that rewards to such an extent those who have such knowledge.

If a culture of effective Portuguese-American political lobbying is to emerge, there must be a supersession of the present sterile alternating dichotomy between innocent naiveté and simpleminded cynicism. Not unlike everyone else, elected officials are worse than devils, and yet also better than angels. One must not portray the lobbied for action as an official's opportunity to do what is right and suffer pain, or to do what is wrong and experience pleasure, neither which is

sustainable in the long run, but, instead, as an opportunity to do what's right with a full complement of pleasure. One must enlist both superego as well as id to one's cause.

If a culture of effective Portuguese-American political lobbying is to emerge, the Portuguese will have to learn to present their interests as those of the larger community's. For example, proposals for measures that would increase the number of Portuguese voters in a particular community, such as requiring Portuguese-speaking poll workers, are often perceived as a threat, a grab for power, and therefore vigorously opposed by others; such proposals would be more effective if they were conveyed in terms of the larger good, such as increasing the political weight of the community as a whole in statehouse and Washington councils. And the reproduction of an ethnic hierarchy that keeps the Portuguese excluded from positions of power, will have to be challenged not on the basis of one's being Portuguese, but on the basis of an American ideology that finds such an illegitimate ethnic hierarchy abhorrent.

Now that we have discussed some of the elements of effective lobbying, the question is raised as to what ends should such lobbying be directed? What political good are we capable of? How can we best help those who are most in need of help, in a manner that does not lessen, but, instead, heightens our powers? What issue can serve to unite an all too fractious community, and provide the experience that will make dialogue over more divisive issues less divisive?

It is not a matter of chance that the political leadership that changed America's policy towards Indonesia's brutal occupation of East Timor -- by cutting off military relations and threatening to cut off International Monetary Fund and World Bank financing as well -- came from public officials elected by the Portuguese-American community. The security and well being of the people of East Timor is an issue that for the very best of reasons and intentions unites us. It is an issue of which the Portuguese community has more awareness and knowledge than the American community in general, and it is an issue that we, as citizens of the world's only superpower, can do something about. Grappling with the issue of East Timor is to grapple with what is lowest and what is highest in human affairs; it is a challenge to the fullest development of our political power, in order that we may be better able to help those whom we care about, who are in dire circumstances, on the other side of the planet.